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A SHORT TREATISE ON READING ALOUD.

By Ernest Legouvé.

Translated (with kind permission of Messrs. Hetzel, of Paris) for the "Parents' Review."

(*Continued from page* 196.)

Pronunciation.

We now pass from the world of sounds to the world of words. Consonants represent the scaffolding of a word: they alone can give it a body. A word whose consonants alone remain can always be reconstructed, in the same way that Cuvier reconstructed animals whose skeletons alone could be found. The union of vowels and consonants constitutes pronunciation, for a consonant cannot be pronounced unless united to a vowel, and a vowel by itself forms a sound that can be emitted, but not a word that can be pronounced. Clearness of diction, correctness of delivery, the life itself of speech, depends on a good pronunciation; therefore it is important to know its precise rules. These rules, as regards vowels, may be condensed into one: vowels must receive the intonations familiar in Paris. Paris lays down the law as far as vowels are concerned. Nearly all the provinces, more especially those of the South, pronounce the vowels with a peculiar accent which occasionally borders on the ridiculous. I may quote here a striking example of this. Some time ago, one of our most powerful orators was replying to one of the Ministers and his rare qualities of fire and wit had perhaps never shown to so much advantage: suddenly, in the midst of a sentence, these words were heard, "La Chambre *hotte* (haute)," then came "*fantommes* (fantômes)," and at last "*les eunées* (années)." Everybody began to laugh. The thread of the discourse was lost for a moment and the effect somewhat diminished. But, suppose that instead of a first rate orator, the speaker had been a man of medium talents, a stranger to whose defects the audience were unaccustomed: at each reappearance of his fatal vowels, he would have been interrupted by laughs and whispers;

nobody would have listened to his words, his accent alone would have been noticed; he would have had the greatest difficulty in gaining the ear of the house, and all the effects of his talents would have gone for nothing.

A few days ago a young provincial, full of fire and enthusiasm, begged me to give him some advice about reading in public. "Recite one of La Fontaine's fables for me," I said.

He began.

"Du pâlais d'un jeune lâpin." I stopped him then and there. "First learn the real sound of the vowels, and then we shall see."

Everywhere, except in Paris, will be found this endemic and epidemic alteration of the vowel. Sometimes it is the *a*, sometimes the *e*, sometimes the *o*, which are disfigured; even in Paris, persons of the lower classes or of inferior education give a most vulgar intonation to the diphthong. How many people say "chaquin" instead of "chacun." Accustom yourself, therefore, if you wish to read in public, to give to each vowel its proper accentuation; and reflect that a short accent substituted for a long one, or a circumflex one instead of an acute one, suffices to spoil the best of sentences.

In the case of consonants, the science of pronunciation is identical with that of articulation. Few people are born with an absolutely perfect articulation. In some persons it is harsh, in others soft, in others again, deficient. Practice, methodical and assiduous practice, alone can remedy this defect. How can it be done? I will teach a very ingenious way of so doing, which can be practised by everybody, and which is the result of observation. You have an important secret which you wish to impart to a friend, but are afraid of being overheard, as the door of the room in which you are is open, and there is somebody in the neighbouring apartment. Will you go close to your friend and whisper in his ear? No; you do not dare to do that for fear of being surprised in that attitude, which would at once betray you. What are you to do then? I will tell you (I am quoting the actual words of M. Regnier, that teacher of teachers): "You place yourself opposite your friend and, speaking in a low voice, using the least amount of sound possible, you make your articulation carry your words to his eyes as well as to his ears; for he watches you speak

quite as much as he listens. The articulation has therefore a double duty to perform. It takes the place of sound itself, and consequently is obliged to define clearly each word, and to emphasise strongly each syllable in order to make it penetrate to your listener's mind. This is an infallible method of correcting all weaknesses and imperfections of the articulation. Practise it for some months, and you will find that these gymnastics make your articulatory muscles so strong and supple that in their elasticity they will answer to all the movements of thought, and are equal to any difficulties of elocution.*

The part played by articulation in reading is immense. It is articulation, and that alone, which gives clearness, energy, passion, vehemence. Its influence is so great that it will redeem a weak voice even before a large audience. There have been actors of the highest merit who had hardly any voice. Potier had none. Monvel, the famous Monvel, had none. He did not even possess teeth. In spite of which, not only was no word of his ever lost, but no artist has ever produced more pathetic or more electrifying effects. How was it done? Thanks to his articulation. The most admirable reader I have ever heard was M. Andrieux. Yet his voice was more than weak, it was feeble, hoarse, fretful. How did he triumph over so many defects? By his articulation. It has been said of him that he made people hear him by dint of making them listen to him; to which you can add, by dint of articulating.

Occasionally an accidental hoarseness teaches an actor all the resources of articulation. One day, M. Bouffé was acting one of his most admired parts, that of the Père Grandet in *The Miser's Daughter*. On reaching the most affecting scene in the piece, in which the old miser discovers he has been robbed, the actor began to cry out and shout as was his custom. But, in a few minutes, his voice died away on his lips, and he was obliged to speak in a whisper. What was the result? That he was a thousand times more true and pathetic, because

* M. Regnier's method is identical with that in use for teaching deaf mutes to speak. The master draws, so to speak, the words before them with his mouth—no sound, no voice, nothing but the articulation, the deaf mute reads off the lips.

he was obliged to supplement the deficiency of sound by articulation. One cannot speak without voice, but voice alone is of such insignificance in diction, that there have been readers, actors, and orators to whom the richness of their vocal organ became an inconvenience. If they cannot articulate the word is drowned by the sound, the consonants by the vowels; they speak so loudly, they read so loudly, they make so much noise both in reading and speaking, that they are not heard. Sometimes it happens that articulation is suppressed by fashion. You may remember that in the last century fashionable men talked about "Ma paole d'honneur": it was considered pedantic to pronounce the consonants.* An old "habitué" of the Théâtre Français used to say that in a period of sixty years the manner of articulating had been three times altered by those whom it is customary to designate "the golden youth." In grown-up men there is but one fashion, and that is to pronounce so as to be understood, but not so markedly as to be in any way noticeable.

Stammering.

Stammering constitutes a much graver defect because it is much more difficult to correct, and is of a very peculiar kind. It is at one and the same time a material and intellectual defect. It is, without doubt, due to conformation, and therefore comes within a physician's scope. But it is also due to the intellect, and therefore comes within the grasp of the art of reading. The tongue often stammers, and does so habitually, because the mind stammers, because the character stammers, because one does not know exactly what one wishes to say, because one is nervous, because one is angry, because one wishes to speak too fast; impatience, timidity, want of clearness in ideas, such are the causes of the stammering that is curable. Accustom yourself to speak slowly, to speak only when you have perfect control over yourself, and you will cease to stammer. I could mention a celebrated singer, who, when speaking, stammers slightly, but has no tendency to it at all when singing. Why this difference? Because, when

*Vide *Punch*.—Duchess of A. to Lady B.: "The frēezin' would be all very well if it were not for the snowin'. It's the snowin' and rainin' that spoil the skatin'."

singing, he treads on ground where he exercises perfect mastery. Practice, study, custom, have made him sure of his voice and also of his speech when speech is united to song ; but when he speaks only, his natural timidity of mind brings back all his uncertain pronunciation. The artist vanishes, the man remains, and the stammerer reappears.

With reference to material stammering which arises solely from the conformation of the organ, a physician alone can cure it.

Generally it appears before all the letters : but sometimes the stammerer has one or two particular enemies in the alphabet in front of which he always stops, like a horse before certain obstacles. I can quote a curious anecdote on this subject. Twenty years ago, I wrote in collaboration with Scribe a comedy called *The Fairy's Fingers*, in which was a part for a stammerer. The part was meant to be funny but not ridiculous, and in some places I even wished it to be pathetic. M. Got had accepted the part with pleasure, but as soon as he began to study it, his perplexity was great. He did not want it to be a servile imitation of M. Bridoison's style, but how to be interesting or pathetic and still remain funny ? One day, however, he arrived at rehearsal quite triumphant. "I have hit off my part," said he. "I shall only stammer on two consonants, the *p* and the *d*, but always on those two. Thanks to this idea, which was suggested to me by my recent studies of stammerers, I shall relieve myself from the constant strain which would be necessary if I stammered everywhere, I shall deliver the part from the monotony involved by a general defect, whilst retaining just enough imperfection to render my speeches piquant and comic. Only," said he gaily, "that will give you a little extra work, my dear author ; for I shall have to trouble you to write in a few more *p*'s and *d*'s. I will show you the places where I shall require them." This was done, and the success fully justified his expectation. I do not think this eminent artist ever created a more original part.

Is organic stammering curable ? I doubt it. Physicians have made many trials, but I have never seen a perfect cure. Temporary ameliorations, intermittent disappearances, the semblance of a cure . . . but an authentic one ? Never. Certain specialists have advertised in the newspapers the large number

of their wonderful cures. Here is a fact, of which I was an eye-witness. In my younger days, I once went to a ball given by a doctor who was a specialist for stammering, and whose theoretic works have been of the greatest service to the art of speech.

"Sir," said I to one of my neighbours in the ballroom, "will you be my *vis-à-vis* for this quadrille ? "

"With p—p—p—pleasure, sir."

"Ah ! one of the patients," said I to myself.

Refreshments were being handed round.

"Sir, would you kindly pass me an ice ? said I to another young man.

"C—c—c—certainly, sir."

"Ah ! another patient."

I found myself confronting one of my old schoolfellows.

"Ah, ah ! that you," said he. "D—d—do you r—r—remember how I used t—t—t—to stammer at school ?

"Oh ! yes ! "

"Well, I p—p—put m—m—myself under Mr. C—C—Conlombat's c—c—care, and since then I am c—com—completely c—c—cured."

This occurrence has always made me rather sceptical about stammerers who were completely cured. To complete our view of the art of reading, considered as a material art, we have only to discuss the subject of punctuation.

(To be continued.)